

The Choice of Topics in Male, Female and Mixed-sex Groups of Students of Petra Christian University in their Chatting

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Abstract: This study analyzed some conversations in the male, female and male-female groups of some university students. Using McCarthy's classification of topics, the results show that 'Persons' is the typical topic in the female group, while 'Objects/ belongings' is the most favorite topic in the male group. In the mixed-sex group, it is interesting to see how both sexes negotiated the topics by proposing the typical topics of the other sex group.

Key words: conversation, chatting, topic of talk, conversation, men's language, women's language, opening, topic boundary, topic shifts.

Doughty et al. (1971) says that chatting is one of the fundamental aspects of social relation in which people interact to one another based on trust, solidarity, respect, and openness. Chatting occurs when two or more people gather up into one group and make small and relaxed conversation. In chatting, the conversation tends to be more interactional than transactional, because the sharing of feelings to enhance relationship is much stronger than exchanging news or information.

Quite a few people think that chatting is of no use, meaningless and wasting time. Others also think that chatting is not worth observing because every participant talks freely without structure. However, a number of studies showed that observing chatting is interesting. It is true that participants in a chatting do not plan ahead or structure their talk and turns as in formal communication, but outsiders or observers of a chatting may be able to identify that indeed there is a pattern or structure of the conversation without the interlocutors realizing it.

Although there is no moderator in a chatting, it in fact provides a good example of how conversation is governed, topics and turns

negotiated, and conversational markers signaled and understood. This study looks into the topics that occurred in chatting of male, female and mixed-sex groups of college students.

CHATTING

In Webster's Dictionary (1983), chatting is defined as "a kind of light talking that is done in informal manner and the way people try to get relaxed by making a small conversation" (1983). According to Jones (1990), chatting is a kind of mutual self-disclosure and a transaction. This means that in chatting people can be themselves, open and share their feelings and at the same time give information and receive feedback from the other participants. Goffman (1969) suggests another understanding of a chatting,

When a set of persons are on familiar terms and feel that they need not stand on ceremony with one another, then inattentiveness and interruption are like to become rife, and talk may degenerate into a happy babble of disorganized sound (p. 103)

In chatting, the role as a speaker and a listener can change among the participants very easily. Coulthard (1978) notes that the basic rule in conversation is that only one speaker talks at a time. So, whenever two or more participants are talking at the same time, it can be sure that one of them will be inactive immediately and take the role as a listener, who may resume to take the speaking turn afterwards (Siegman and Feldstein, 1979).

TOPICS AND ITS FLUX

When a group of people is involved in a conversation, there must be at least one interesting topic which enables them to keep the conversation going. One of some definitions of topics that was used in this study is the one proposed by McCarthy (1991). McCarthy defines topics as the domination of utterances marked as relevant to one another by the participants in a talk. He believes that topics are the reason for people to talk and these topics still exist because people are still talking.

Further, McCarthy divides topics into two categories. The first is by simply looking at the topic from a pragmatic view, which is based on relevant criteria. The second is by using semantic field that is based on the

‘headline’ of the conversation. The topic of the conversation is then based on the summary of the conversation itself. His criteria about a topic lead him to conclude that in one topic there are several sub-topics which have close relation with the main topic. This makes sense in a way that people talk about something or someone and may expand or relate to other things. The other interlocutors may subtly shift to other still-related topics or abruptly change the topics (Hudson, 1980).

Sacks, as cited in Coulthard (1985), argues that the suitability of topics depends on the person one is talking to. Brown and Levinson, as cited in Brown and Yule (1983) also believe that in order to maintain the conversation, the speaker and the listener must share a common point of view. This means that they must negotiate and agree to the topics of the conversation, especially if they come from different cultures. Otherwise, the conversation may turn up into an argument.

A whole long conversation can be divided into units which are based on the main topics. Klein and Androu (1983), suggest that the units in a conversation should be based on the ‘propositional’ topic which the speaker claims and then elaborates it in a more complex reported experience. This suggests that in every conversation there are several units of talks and in each unit one main topic occurs.

MEN AND WOMEN IN CHATTING

There have been a great number of studies conducted on the characteristics of men’s and women’s language (among others, Lakoff, 1975; Poynton, 1989; Cameron, 1990; Coates, 1986; Tannen, 1990). Some of the results are found contradictory to some others. However, generally it is understood that men and women speak in different manners. Holmes (1992) says that the differences are caused by the different socialization and acculturation, and miscommunication between them maybe because they have different expectations in communication. She believes that both sexes interact in the same way but in different strategies and different patterns.

The differences between men and women in the choice of topics in chatting are clearly explained by Gumperz (1982). He concluded that women and men have different cultural rules for friendliness and these different rules can sometimes create miscommunication between them. Jones (1990) shows that, “women are not only sharing information, but

are asking each other” (p. 246). Holmes (1991) also emphasizes that women tend to talk about their feelings and their relationship, while men tend to compare their knowledge, experiences, and recount competitive exploits. Thorne, as cited by Eschholz, Rosa and Clark (1990), also strengthens that men practically talk about anything except personal feelings. Eakins and Eakins, as mentioned by Poynton (1989), conclude that men’s greatest conversational interests seem to be business and money, followed by sports and amusements, while women tend to talk about men and clothes. Besides, topics about person play a larger part in women’s conversation than in men’s.

METHODOLOGY

This study invited eight university students of 21-25 years old from several departments at Petra Christian University to be the subjects. Three girls were in the female group, three boys in the male group, and two girls (from the female group) and two other boys in the mixed-sex group. The subjects had close relationship toward one another and often chatted and spent time together. The selection of such subjects was important because the recorded conversations would then result as naturally as they usually chatted.

The conversations took place in the boarding house of one of the subjects. Each conversation was carried out in the living room while they were watching TV or VCD. The conversation was each recorded in thirty minutes, although the whole conversation lasted longer. The recording was then transcribed for further analysis.

The transcriptions of the three groups were then divided into several fragments based on the topics and sub-topics occurring in the talk. In the male-female conversation we identified also the topic nominator of the talk to better understand the topics that occurred in the mixed-sex group.

THE MOST FAVORITE TOPICS

After the analysis, it was found that there were 9 topic units in the female group, 12 units in the male group, and 15 units in the mixed-sex group. Following McCarthy’s definition of topics (1991), the topics in the chatting of the subjects could be categorized as Person, Object/Belonging, and Activity with the kinds of topics or sub-topics stated in Table 1.

Table 1. Topic Category and Topics in the Students' Chatting

Topic Category	Topics/Sub-topics
Person	friends, families, relatives, teachers, strangers, celebrities
Object/Belonging	cigarettes, foods, drinks, nail polish, VCD, hand phones, jeans, pictures, places, notes, job
Activity	Plans on weekend, promises, report on past experiences

From the above classification, Table 2 shows the occurrence of the topic category in each group.

Table 2. Topic Category occurring in the groups

Topic Category	Female		Male		Mixed-Sex	
	No.	%	No	%	No	%
Person	7	(78)	3	(25)	6	(40)
Object/ Belonging	-	-	9	(75)	7	(47)
Activity	2	(22)	-	-	2	(13)
Total	9	(100)	12	(100)	15	(100)

Topics in the Female Group

It can be seen from Table 2 that the female subjects have the tendency to talk about "Person" when they chatted (78%). They liked to talk about their friends (in 5 units), relative (1 unit) and their teacher (1 unit). Probably, because it was a chat among friends, they then talked about a friend whom the others knew. They might think that it was inappropriate to talk too much about their family or relatives because the others would not know them. Probably, it was because the relationship was not close enough for them to talk about their family or relatives. The following extract shows the topic of 'friend' in the female chatting.

Extract 1 (Unit IV, lines 168-240)

F1: *Eh, E (a student) itu lho mbencekno. Lu tau, E itu khan tanya-tanya, 'Kamu ambek Bu Y (a teacher) itu yak apa?'. Ya tak bilangi, aku mbek Bu Y itu gini-gini. Kan waktu itu belum sama sekali, ambek Bu Y belum, gitu lho.*

(E is really **annoying**. You know, she asked me about my thesis advisement with Mrs. Y. I told her how. At that time, we haven't started the advisement.)

F2: *Lho E itu tipene ancen gitu, jadi dhe'e ...*
(It's typical of her.)

F1: *Lho dhe'e gak percaya, gitu lho. Terus ngapain dicek lagi ambek Bu Y aku ini sampe mana-mana.*
(She didn't believe me. Why on earth did she then check my progress with Mrs. Y?)

F2: *Emboh*
(I don't know.)

F1: *Onok yo sing sekali itu, sing dek depanku atek nanyak aku ambek Bu Y. Dep-depan dhe'e tanya aku , gitu lho. 'I (F1) ini sampe mana sih Bu?' isa kayak gitu lho. (6 sentences in between). Mangkak'no orang itu aneh-aneh.*

(Once she even asked Mrs Y when I was in front of her. In front of my face she asked her, "How far has she worked, Mam?" (6 sentences in between.) That's why she is strange.)

F2: *Yang penting buat satu orang belum tentu penting buat orang lain, ya.*
(What's important for one may not be important for the others.)

F1: *He'eh, be'e bagi aku mbencekno, bagi dhe'e ya nggak mbencekno, be'e ya? Bila perlu, dhe'e tak ngonokno sisan ya? (5 sentences in between)*
(Yeah. Maybe it's annoying for me, but not for her. If necessary, I'll treat her the same.)

F2: *Lho tapi kamu tanya, ada apa, buat apa itu dhe'e ngomong, ya cekno Bu Y tau, gitu tok.*
(But you asked, what's up, why she had to talk about it, right? Maybe just to let Mrs. Y know.)

F1: *He'eh. Lho ndak apa-apa toh, dhe'e jadi isa punya gambaran 'Kamu dek Bu Y itu yak apa, sistime Bu Y itu yak apa'. Dhe'e ngomong kayak gitu. Perlu tah E? ... Kente'an bahan gosip lho, tak bilangi, dhe'e itu. Gosip-gosip skripsine dhe'e nggak onok omongan. Maleh ngossipi skripsine wong liyo, dhe'e.*

(Yeah. It's okay, so that she got the picture about how Mrs Y advised her thesis students. But is it necessary that she asked her like that? Maybe she ran out of gossips. Rumors have it that her own thesis writing was not running very well. Now she is gossiping others' theses.)

From the example above, luminously, the female subjects enjoyed talking about person. In chatting of this kind, the female subject tends to include her feeling like “*mbencekno*” (annoying) about one of her friends.

When talking about other people, interestingly enough to note that women were likely to express their feelings and emotions to the group as a way to keep the closeness of relationship among themselves. By exchanging personal thoughts, they were not only expressing closeness but also mutual commitment. Maltz and Borker (1982) say that women talk in order to create and maintain relationship, because friendship is seen by women as something involving intimacy, equality, mutual commitment, trust and loyalty (p. 206).

Contradictory to ‘Person’, the topic ‘Activity’ only occurred in two units (22%) and ‘Object/Belonging’ was not involved in the nine units of topics in the female group. They seemed to have less interest in these topics than in ‘Person’. Poynton (1989) suggests that women are taught to support and nurture others, and to feel the others’ happiness or pains. That is why, when they grow up they subconsciously follow their nature. Also, talking about ‘object/belonging’ may be perceived to sound boasting and can damage the equality among them; therefore, they probably preferred not to talk about it.

Topics in the Male Group

In contrast to the female group, the male tended to talk about ‘Object/Belonging’ in 9 topic units (75%). The objects they talked about include VCD (3 units), hand phones (3 units) and food, cigarette and jeans in one unit each. The example is:

Extract 2 (Unit VI, lines 118-198)

M2: *Handphone lu, sing lu jual itu apa? Ericsson apa?*

(What type of handphone did you sell? Which Ericsson?)

M3: *Sing paling baru dari ini. Ini 388 lho.. eh 338.*

(The latest model. This is 388, oh no, 338.)

M2: *Ini 337.*

(It’s 337.)

M3: *337.*

(337.)

M2: *Sing paling baru 338, toh?*

(The latest is 338, right?)

M3: *He'e*

(Yeah)

M1: *Onok baru lagi sekarang. (22 exchanges about handphones)*

(There's a new one now.)

M2: *Motorrola 5200, nopek, 225 lengkap.*

(Motorrola 5200, two hundred, 225 complete)

M1: *Oh, itu sing gak pakek SIM card, itu.*

(Oh, that's the one without SIM card)

M2: *Bukan ... bukan AMPL, aku ada barange dek rumah, tapi 5200. Wis lama toh? Batere 2, 75 sitok*

(No.... not AMPL. I have it at home, but it's 5200. An old one, right? Two batteries, seventy five each.)

It can be seen from the above extract that the male students showed their knowledge of the latest technology, price and features of hand phones. By talking about new things or the latest technology, men, according to Coates (1986), can show that they are up-to-date and prove themselves to be better informed about current affairs. Escholz et al (1990) also conclude that men might feel more proud and more respected by others if they talked about their accomplishment and power.

Concerning the other conversational topics, the male group talked about "Person" only in 3 units and did not talk about "Activity". The way they talked about "Person" is very much different from the way the female did. The boys did it in short utterances and mostly just to gain information, without involving feeling or emotion. For example:

Extract 3 (Unit I, lines 1-6)

M1: *Kokomu mari ta?*

(Has your brother finished his study?)

M2: *Heh?*

(Pardon?)

M1: *Kokomu mari ta?*

(Your brother, has he finished his study?)

M2: *Iyo, koen kok ero?*

(Yeah, how did you know?)

M1: *Lha mari cerito.*

(He just told me)

M2: *Ehm.*

(Ehm.)

M1: *Apik'e!* (commenting the film on TV)
(Wow, good!)

In the example above, M1 was checking whether M2's brother had finished his study or not. M2 confirmed it and at the same time asked how M1 knew about it. M1 answered that his brother told him himself. As an opener of a conversation (this extract was taken from Unit I, lines 1-6), this topic could not be developed further because M1 had already known the answer. It is possible also that M1 used this topic just to break the ice between him and M2, because he had known the answer of his question. Unfortunately, this was not developed as M2 just closed this part with "Ehm" and M1 did not continue to talk about it. Rather, he gave a comment about the film on TV that they were watching.

Topics in the Mixed-sex Group

It is very interesting to see that in the mixed-sex group both the male and the female subjects negotiated the topics of their chatting. In the previous table, it can be seen that there were 15 topics in the same length of time as in the conversation of the female or the male group. The most occurring topic was "Object/Belonging" – the most favorite topic in the male groups (in 7 units), and the topic of "Person" – the most dominant topic in the female group – occurred in 6 units. After a second analysis to see the topic nominator, it is even more interesting to see that the female nominated 5 of the 7 topics of "Object/Belonging". Probably, the girls were aware of the boys' favorite topics and they adjusted their choice of topics so that the conversation could run well. The sub-topics were food, nail polish, teacher's note, food and drink, picture, interesting place, and drinks. An example of a topic nominated by the female is the following.

Extract 4 (Unit VII, lines 184-192)

F1: *Apa, sih, ini, Ed? Aku kok nggak ngerti.*
(What's this, Ed? I don't understand.)

M1: *Mekanika.*
(Mechanical Design.)

F1: *Gampang tho, nggambar-nggambar gini?*
(Is it easy to draw something like this?)

F2: (interrupts) *Enak, nggak?*
(Is it good?)

M1: *Eh, nggak.*

(Eh, no.)

F2: *Sini, coba.*

(Come on. Can I try?)

F1: *Kurang ajare.*

(How rude!)

M1: *Jangan gangguin semua.*

(Everybody, just don't disturb me.)

F1 nominated a topic by asking M1 about his mechanical design. This could be understood as an attempt to show interest in M1's work. M1 answered briefly. F1 asked again whether it was easy to draw. F2 interrupted and teased him by asking whether it was 'enak' (literally it means 'delicious'), which was by all means out of place. M1 answered shortly that it was not, but F2 insisted in trying to draw like him. F1 criticized F2's moves by saying "How rude!". There seemed to be a competition between F1 and F2 to impress M1 on how interested they were in his work. Unfortunately, both female failed, because in the next turn M1 closed this unit by telling the girls not to disturb him.

The second topic, "Person", is an interesting indication also of how the male subjects adjusted their choice of topics, although each sex group nominated the same number of topics (50% each). The female nominated 3 topic units of a friend and a stranger, and the male nominated 3 topic units of family, a celebrity, and a friend. It seems that the boys tried to talk more about this girls' favorite topic or at least gave more responses when the girls were talking about it. In the following extract, the male nominated a topic of a celebrity he read in a gossip tabloid.

Extract 5 (Unit VIII, lines 252-264)

M1: *Eh, kamu nggak baca Mbak Tata itu kawin. Kan diketok no, toh? Sayang dapat Tommy.*

(Hey, didn't you read that Tata got married. The pictures were shown. It's a pity that she married Tommy.)

F1: *Kabeh kok ngomong gitu, ya?*

(Why does everybody say that?)

M1: *He'eh.*

(Yeah)

F1: *Berarti Tommy deserve, ya.*

(Does it mean Tommy deserves to marry her?)

M1: Kalo aku mau sama Tommy. Mau Timor e thok.

(I want to marry him. Only to have his Timor [car])

F2: Kacek e akeh, lho. 13 tahun.

(The age difference is big. 13 years)

M1: He' eh, tadi aku liat di Nova itu, eh, manis, gitu. Kayak anak baru 17 tahun. Lha itu, Tommy.

(Yeah. I read it in 'Nova'. She's so sweet. Just like a 17-year-old. See, this is Tommy)

F1: O, bukan ini, ini lama, ini. Manis, ya?

(No, not that one, it's an old picture. She's sweet, right?)

M1: He'eh.

(Yeah.)

It could be very rare that M1 would nominate such topic in front of the other boys in a male-only conversation. However, in front of the girls, he could involve actively in gossiping someone and show how much he knew about the person. Interestingly enough, he included also his evaluation of the celebrity, commenting that she was a sweet person ("Manis, gitu").

The high number of topics in the mixed-sex group (15 topics) is also an indication of how both sex groups negotiated the topics that they were going to discuss in their chatting. When we ran a second analysis on the transcription, the result strengthened the previous claim that the male and the female in the mixed-sex group indeed had to negotiate their topics. Therefore, topic shifts took place several times resulting in the high number of topics and in average each topic was discussed in the smallest number of utterances. Table 3 below shows the average number of utterances per topic in each group.

Table 3. Average Utterances per Topic

Groups	No. of Utterances	No. of Topics	Average utterances/topic
Female	474	9	52.67
Male	485	12	40.41
Mixed-sex	487	15	32.47

It seems that chatting about one topic in a single-sex group can last longer than in a mixed-sex group. The participants in the same-sex group could hold talking about one topic in more utterances than in the mixed-

sex group. This could happen because probably the participants in the single-sex conversation felt more secure to contribute and accepted the others' opinion than in the mixed-sex group because some topics might not interest the other sex so that the participants offered a new topic.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that there are typical topics in the chatting of male, female and male-female groups. Feeling secure in the same-sex conversation, the participants could contribute their opinions more freely in longer time and more utterances. On the other hand, either the subjects realized about the notion of male-female typical topics or not, the negotiation among the male and female participants in the mixed-sex conversation was very strong. This in the end supports studies on the differences of how male and female communicate. Hopefully, this finding will improve the way male and female communicate to each other and may reduce misunderstanding and miscommunication.

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